

## **Recruitment – What Impact Does Technology Have?**

*Agency reputation, job fairs and classified advertisements just doesn't get it anymore!*

**by**

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

## **Recruitment – What Impact Does Technology Have?**

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Police organizations have historically relied on conventional methods to recruit police officers. At the same time, law enforcement has lagged behind implementing timely and applicable technological strategies to address this issue. The candidate pool for qualified people interested in police work is continuing to be redefined in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Gaps in generational divide have been extensively researched, and law enforcement is not immune to these differences in priorities of prospective police candidates. The lack of focus on the use of technology impacts our ability to maintain a productive workforce. This is particularly true with younger generations. Sustainability of the future law enforcement workforce will be adversely impacted if the industry fails to make a business model paradigm shift.

### **ACCESSING INFORMATION**

Accessing and processing information instantaneously has become the norm and an expectation by gamers, generation Y and future millennials that will occupy future police organizations. For some officers already in the industry, the impact of technology that is applicable to enhancing the level of efficiency in accomplishing their work is just as important. As law enforcement continues to experience the demand of technology usage by prospective police officers candidates, organizations that do not address this issue will lag behind other agencies. Candidates will look elsewhere. Successful organizations that meet this demand will focus on implementing a comprehensive marketing and advertisement campaign to include branding for the organization, establish

a stand alone URL website for recruitment and streamline the selection hiring process, with a sharp focus on Internet-based processing. Strong internet presence is important even when organizations are not actively hiring, as this may be the only opportunity to make a positive impression to the outside world.

Embracing the realization that officers prefer to use technology to accomplish their jobs sets the stage for progress in how law enforcement will address the recruitment of our next-generation workforce. In *The World is Flat*, Friedman argues that any work product or function that can be outsourced, digitized or automated is subject to being replaced by what we know today to be a traditional workforce ([Friedman, 2006](#)). This is no different for future police officers and how we attract and retain them considering the phenomenal pace at which technology changes. According to *Windows on the Future* ([Jakes and McCain, 2004](#)), technical information doubled every two weeks in 2006 and is forecasted to double every 72 hours by 2010. By this measure, prospective police recruit applicants will be bombarded with information and have an estimated doubled capacity of information available to them every 24 hours within the next few years. Police organizations need to make information readily available to the outside world to remain competitive. They must be transparent and take every opportunity to convey their message.

There are significant generational gaps to be considered when we examine the recruitment of police officers considering a portion of Generation X, all Generation Y and Millennials have grown up watching sci-fi television in which serial murder cases are solved in a 30 minute episode – *including commercials*, according to some college students ([Nominal group technique – Perez, 2008](#)). Whether it's the use of

nanotechnology, robotics or biotechnology, all of these types of technology are the futures frame of reference when it comes to the endless possibilities in responding to and preventing crime. According to an expert panel convened to study workforce trends, this is what will continue to drive and sustain interest in our future work forces (Nominal group research panel, 2008).

## **FIELD APPLICATION**

Research indicates there are instances where there are positive outcomes when technology is used to recruit tech savvy individuals (Abend, 2006). Internet providers such as [www.monsterjobs.com](http://www.monsterjobs.com) recognize the need to access and process information instantaneously. Internet advertisers conduct extensive research on what key components of a web page attracts people's attention. Internet advertisers meet with key individuals in the police department to identify what are the focused needs. They also help identify goals and outcomes of the targeted niche advertisement. In police work, a consistent themed message is important. It is what the organization is known for in the industry and to the outside world. This can be just as true for a public safety organization.

The Sacramento CA Police Department participated in a federally sponsored study by the U.S. Department of Justice, COPS Office in which they were selected from five nationwide *Hiring in the Spirit of Service* (HSS) demonstration sites to examine the recruitment of police officers in 2002 (Scrivner, 2002). The project's "lessons learned" chapter makes specific note of the importance of "branding" the agency in the minds of potential applicants (Scrivner, 2002).

Branding can be capstone words, phrases, an item or thing that makes an organization's mark known and widely recognized (Abend, 2006). It is widely used in the

advertisement and marketing development arenas of the private sector. Although law enforcement does not generally identify this strategy as branding, it is precisely what may be required for the basis of a recruitment plan according to technology and marketing experts.

In a U.S. Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) resource DVD entitled *Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention Resources for Law Enforcement*; the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department is featured as a model web-based recruitment strategy. The message in this website focuses on successful women in law enforcement and incorporates family life. It is personable, meaningful, technologically advanced for ease of use and application. It is real. What makes it a model is it supports its expressed and implied claims, which focus on diversity and the use of technology according recruiting administrators. The website is concise yet informative and even more important is the ease of accessibility after grabbing your attention. It is aesthetically appealing to the viewer with a concrete message on the cover page. Other sample websites will be discussed; however, we will first explore what maybe the primary cause of ineffective recruitment programs – the lack of a well defined strategic recruitment plan.

In a 2005, seventy-six California law enforcement agencies responded to a recruitment and retention symposium survey facilitated by the Commission on Peace Officer Standards Training. One of the facts uncovered in the survey was that nearly 8,300 sworn vacancies were reported. This is a critical issue that is always at the forefront of any sworn staffing strategy is support personnel. Generally, police agencies require 1 support person for every 2 sworn police officers to accomplish its mission. In spite of

81% of the agencies reporting recruitment as a problem for their respective organization, only 26% indicated they had a written strategic plan for recruitment (Switzer, POST Recruitment and Retention Best Practices, 2006). In this same study, focus groups identified the need to establish a concrete message to potential candidates. With regards to retention, 72% of the survey respondents indicated that retention is still an issue and 54% believe was a bigger problem than four years ago (Switzer, M. 2006).

In Washington, the Tacoma Police Department (which is very similar in size to the ninth largest police department in California) allocated \$271,000.00 to their 2008 recruitment budget. After a two year hiring freeze between 2001-2003 left the Tacoma Police Department with a 10% vacancy rate or 40 sworn positions, the agency first looked to identify a “slogan” (brand) to revolutionize the daunting task of recruiting in a highly competitive market (Mulick, [www.thenewstribune.com](http://www.thenewstribune.com)). This strategy provided the Tacoma PD with a broad reaching, consistent message to potential police officer candidates.

It can not be overstated enough that the next generation of future police officer candidates are increasingly savvy to available technology and prefer its use for job searching and pre-employment screening. Time expenditure in their life is important so that other social networking can take place in between being hired a police officer. Whether it's the cost savings of maximizing the use of technologies such as the internet or the adverse impact on failing to appeal to future candidate pools that may rely exclusively on technology in the future, law enforcement should explore this venue as an opportunity. The comparison to the law enforcement industry in its quasi para-military

structure is the United States military itself, which can now process recruits 80-90% to enlist all remotely via the internet as cited by the US Army.

## **ACTIONABLE OUTCOMES and RECOMMENDATIONS**

The law enforcement industry is not immune from the need to maintain pace with an ever-changing technological world. This includes strategies to effectively brand their organizational identities in cyberspace. Responding to the preferential change in our future candidate pool to a life of technology will allow police organizations to meet this challenge. To stay ahead of the rapidly changing landscape of technology, police must adapt. The solution is not a one time response. It is a process that must be evaluated regularly to ensure intended outcomes are met.

Historically, police organizations could be seen as linear in their thought process, strategies and approaches to change. The culture of the organization and its historical response and past practice to change are important to consider when implementing a strategic plan. The organizations readiness for change is also important to assess. Strategic plans are constructed to identify a logical sequence of how objectives will be accomplished, by whom, in what time frame and how they will be evaluated. They serve as the road map to move from the organization from its present state to the desired future through a transitional approach.

According to one police information technology administrator, recruitment planning from a business model perspective will be the norm and not a preference to remain competitive (Nominal Group Panel, 2008). Pre-planning will provide clear objectives and a focused response to recruitment using technology. In the case of the Los Angeles CA Police Department, they went to who mattered most to conduct their



research – candidates. They can best tell you what is working for them, what are the bureaucratic pitfalls to pre-employment internet based processing.

A panel of experts was assembled in September 2008 to study and review this emerging issue. Police administrators and supervisors with specific experience in police recruitment, a technology engineer, and an aspiring college police recruit served on the panel. The following is a synopsis of their key recommendations identified for the police profession:

► Recommendation: Implement a marketing and advertisement campaign, to include a current “*branding*” piece for a clearly defined message. Widely used in the private sector, police organizations have not generally incorporated this component into their business plans. We do more much than “protect and serve.” The unique brand, or what an organization is known for, must be well thought out. As a nationally recognized demonstration site for the Community Oriented Policing (COP), the Santa Ana Police Department has had tremendous success with marketing and advertising a comprehensive COP policing strategy. Interested applicants conducting internet research, employees and the public know this is the organizations brand on how they facilitate the delivery of police services.

► Recommendation: Establish a stand alone (URL) interactive website that assesses prospective candidate’s ability to access and use emerging technologies. The impact of the tool is far reaching. As we look to the future, and in collaboration with an industry consultant, the police and personnel departments could develop an on-line gaming instrument which requires applicants to access and pass with a determined minimum score to proceed in the selection process. Similar to the military, organizations would

implement an interactive on-line scenario-based program that allows applicants to virtually experience the life of an on-duty police officer. This virtual tool could also assess standardized knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA's) of applicants. The US Army already has a gaming element incorporated within their website.

In 2007, the Vancouver Police Department launched a virtual on-line recruitment strategy to join the some 6.7 million inhabitants who live, work, play and learn in Second Life. This initiative is aimed at locating real-life people with computer-know how to join the Department ([Vancouver Sun, May 29, 2007](#)). Since future police candidates are very much the Twitter/Flickr/YouTube/MySpace/Facebook generation, the Los Angeles Police Department website offers an interactive website for prospective candidates ([www.lapd.com](http://www.lapd.com)).

► *Recommendation:* Streamline the selection and hiring process with wireless Internet wherever possible. Ideally, at least 75% of your pre-employment screening would be done though on-line processing. The bulk of processing time for police officer applicants is the background investigation. Organizations can work much more efficiently by posting the personal investigation questionnaire, personal history statement, personal reference questionnaires, and even a timed out psychological and polygraph written examination on line with a secure user name and password.

A limited number of agencies have transitioned slowly to web based processing. The idea is not to relegate a final police chief's interview to an on line chat room conversation, but rather transition the time consuming processes that currently requires human resources to address. On line applications, personal history statements, investigative questionnaires, references, can all be handled wirelessly. The applicant

would be required to authenticate documents in person and attend the psychological, medical and physical exams.

## **WEB-BASED PROCESSING**

Pushing towards web based processing may seem just like that – you may have to *persuade* personnel departments to relinquish control of the arduous and oftentimes unjustified delays in applicant processing. Gradual change in this area may be appropriate, but the important thing is to get started. Otherwise, we will fail to address this emerging trend of candidates demanding ease of process through web-based systems. The reputation of an otherwise ideal organization is simply not enough to attract today's candidate.

In an economic downturn faced by the nation and deeply felt by public safety, it is essential that police organizations re-evaluate the manner in which they do business. Law enforcement is certainly not immune to the generational divide and technology's impact on the manner in which we will continue to attract and retain a professional and highly qualified workforce. The challenge for the law enforcement profession is to not only recognize the pace at which technology changes, but to take advantage of change opportunities to our recruitment business practices. The sustainability of law enforcement as a public entity may be at stake if the industry fails to address this fast-paced significant issue.

The merging of one standard web strategy for all municipal departments in a governmental jurisdiction simply does not work, according to police candidates surveyed in Southern California ([Nominal group technique, 2008](#)). If police organizations are to remain competitive in the job market, they need to develop a niche, stand alone web site

that targets police culture. This transformational change will require the deletion of the department's current website. Running concurrent URL websites will not maximize the department's efforts and it also opens the way for inconsistent messages. Web site development is not a one time fix. It requires continual assessment and inspection to ensure it is accomplishing its intended purpose. The new website should include a static and pre-emptive survey tool of whether the end user found it to be user friendly and effective.

## **CONCLUSION**

To initially attract police officers candidates to an organization and retain their loyal service thereafter, agencies need to assess the readiness for change. Although the approach that often works the best to change past practice may be a gradual and systematic strategy, this change required here should be significant and thorough. The first step is to establish a living and flexible framework (strategic plan). This document is important because it memorializes what the overall posturing towards recruitment is and will include specific benchmarks. In the absence of this strategy, anecdotal and traditional means of recruitment are conducted with little to no quantitative data of outcome measures.

The sustainability of police organizations is dependant on the ability of the industry to recognize the impact of technology on recruiting well skilled police officers. These skills include the ability to use technology to leverage reduced numbers of human resources. As we have noted over time that formal education tends to professionalize the industry, the emerging issue for us now is attracting a technologically savvy workforce.

One fundamental driving force that firmly establishes the urgency for changing the manner in which we do business when it comes to recruitment is the adverse financial impact of not working in the most efficient manner possible. It simply makes good business sense to establish a well-developed and flexible strategic recruitment plan that focuses on measuring and attracting people who use technology smartly.

Tomorrow's applicant demands that technology works for them and makes their life easier to process. Police officer candidates are no different. Police organizations that are slow to acknowledge, accept and adapt to this change will be adversely impacted. Embracing the fact that front line officers prefer technology to get the job done expeditiously sets the stage for how police organizations must address this issue. Officers today texting (instant messaging) perimeter locations while responding to in progress calls serves as a wake up call to this emerging issue. How often must they do it for it to be yours?

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